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Don't Hate San Francisco!

Proceedings | Craig Hooper, Ph.D. | October 09, 2007 SHARE

Engage, Don't Estrange

In October 1981, the Blue Angels Naval Flight Demonstration Team soared over a region dotted with active military facilities. It was the first official Fleet Week since 1935. Recalling the glory years of World War II, many locals pinned high hopes on President Ronald Reagan's aggressive Secretary of the Navy, John Lehman.

Those days of promise are long gone. This month, at the 26th annual San Francisco Fleet Week, the Blue Angels will streak over a thoroughly demilitarized Bay Area. With the Cold War won, the Navy abandoned the entire region -- to the point that the Angels now fly from San Francisco International, a civilian airport.

Fleet Week celebrates the Navy's longstanding, mutually beneficial relationship with the Bay Area. But today, a decade after the region's final active Navy installation closed, that grand cooperative legacy is under serious stress.

Everybody is to blame. After four decades of hurt feelings, misunderstandings, highly publicized slights, and, more recently, frustration with a poorly led war, the city that Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger once called "a very good Navy town" is now deemed unworthy of hosting the commissioning ceremony for PCU *Makin Island* (LHD-8).(1)

Zooming In for a Closer Look

The Navy's relationship with San Francisco deserves greater scrutiny. Aside from a few highly publicized exceptions, the Navy still has a lot of friends in the area. In fall 2006 at the height of Fleet Week, the Bay Area Rapid Transit system was swarmed by a record number of people intent on seeing the U.S. warships sail under the Golden Gate Bridge. At a single vantage point for the traditional Blue Angels spectacle, an estimated 150,000 showed up. By Fleet Week's end, more than a million people had directly participated.(2)

Relations might be rocky, but it's time for the Navy to begin re-engaging

residents of what is, in essence, a strategically important city, perched on an increasingly contested Pacific Ocean.

The Civilian Side

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The Base Realignment and Closure Commission was not kind to this area. The last operational base, Naval Station Treasure Island, disappeared a decade ago, but the region still struggles to absorb the post–Cold War closure of virtually every single Bay Area naval facility.

This region swapped active neighborhoods for bases, sacrificed 320 lives in the 1944 Port Chicago Naval Magazine explosion, and built 45 percent of the cargo tonnage and 20 percent of the warships during World War II.

Abandoned military facilities are a regular civic irritant. In June, smoke from Treasure Island's second three-alarm fire in as many months snarled traffic on the Bay Bridge. And only this May did the town of Alameda complete the fractious process of settling on a redeveloper for Alameda Point, site of the closed Naval Air Station Alameda. Meanwhile, on the desolate airstrips, the endangered bird California Least Tern happily colonizes the unused tarmac, further complicating reuse plans.(3)

At Hunter's Point Shipyard, former home of the Naval Radiological Defense Laboratory, regulators continue to wrangle over residual radiation left from more than two decades of nuclear research. Thirty miles off the Golden Gate Bridge, researchers seek funding to monitor radiation levels in fish caught near a sea burying-ground for Hunter's Point nuclear waste. Local activists suspect the debris ranges from the USS *Independence* (CVL-22), a target at the ABLE and very dirty BAKER nuclear bomb tests at Bikini Atoll, to an unknown, poorly documented amount of both low- and high-level radioactive waste.(4)

Few regions endure the long process of closing, cleaning, and transferring abandoned property without harboring some residual resentment. In mid-1995, the Army abandoned a 149-year legacy in San Francisco by shuttering the 6th Army headquarters and closing the base at the Presidio. The process was marred by a series of misunderstandings, foot-dragging, and clashes over environmental cleanup. Later that year, voters narrowly approved an initiative to change the name Army Street, a thoroughfare built more than 140 years ago, to Cesar Chavez Street.(5)

The Army Street fracas is consistently recalled when anti–San Francisco provocateurs discuss the region's seeming disregard for the military. But nobody bothers to recall the context. Clearly nobody visits, either: a quick drive down ex–Army Street suffices for any casual observer to see that this scruffy road would do the military little good as a promotional tool.

And a fresh look at past military actions is not always positive. Throughout the 1950s, the Navy used the region as a biological weapons test site, spreading, in one instance, enough *Bacillus globigii* and *Serratia marcescens* to insure that every resident inhaled at least 5,000 of the microbes -- microbes at the time considered harmless. Though inconclusive, subsequent retrospective studies suggest these tests contributed to the death of at least one Bay Area citizen and sickened many others.(6)

The Military Side

The Navy has its own problems with the area. The regional appetite for anti-war protest has, naturally, reawakened the specter of Vietnam-era protests, when San Francisco was a center of anti-war activism.

Exacerbating today's rallies, for the past year city supervisor Chris Daly has worked to pass a non-binding resolution banning the Blue Angels performance due to safety and noise concerns. Although the proposal has regularly been defeated, voted down as recently as 11 September 2007, the resolution will continue to be widely cited as evidence of San

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Francisco's trendy anti-military animus.

But the level of anti-Angel complaints has been, for years, tiny. In 1996 the Navy received about 40 complaints. In 1997, in the highest number of complaints ever reported, the mayor's office heard from only 100 irritated residents. In 2005 the mayor's office received a dozen calls, half delighted and half annoyed. Using the latest census data, that means only 0.0008 percent of San Francisco wanted the Blue Angels to be quieter.(7)

The area's environmental concerns have irritated the Navy. Officers still smart over the Reagan-era fight to base the battleship USS *Missouri* (BB-63) here. But at the time, the city worried about the prospect of hosting a vessel potentially equipped with nuclear- armed Tomahawk missiles. This fighting over the homeport proposal raised Navy ire. Even though voters approved an initiative in favor of the vessel (sponsored by then-Mayor Diane Feinstein, now a U.S. senator), bad feelings linger.(8)

The Navy is right to be upset that the region seems unappreciative of its sustaining role. But with only the U.S. Coast Guard left as a military presence in the area (see box), it was painless for the city school board to vote out a thriving Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps program in fall 2006. Without fear of repercussions at the ballot box, San Francisco city supervisor Gerardo C. Sandoval went on national TV last year and blathered about how America needed neither military forces nor a warfighting Navy.(9)

Misunderstandings and Misinterpretations

Claims that San Francisco fails to appreciate its Navy legacy can only go so far. The Bay Area is regularly castigated for being reluctant to host the USS *Iowa* (BB-61) memorial, yet the region already maintains or is working to support 12 other floating Navy/military maritime memorials: USS *Potomac* (AG-25), USS *Hornet* (CV-12), LS *Relief* (LV-605), SS *Jeremiah O'Brien*, SS *Red Oak Victory*, USS *Pampanito* (SS-383), USS *Nokomis* (YTB-142), USS *Wenonah* (YT-148), USS *Dekaury* (YTB-178), USS *Bolster* (ARS-38), USS *Wampanoag* (ATA- 202), and the mighty midget, USS LCS[L] 102. This is a far grander commitment to naval history, in both tonnage and numbers, than that of San Diego, America's "Navy town."(10)

The headline-grabbing symbolism of the *Iowa* memorial overlooks serious -- and less newsworthy -- drawbacks. The cash-strapped Bay Port Commission needs a hefty $1.1 billion infusion for infrastructure repairs, while local officials are already scrambling to save the existing aircraft carrier memorial USS *Hornet* (CV-12).

Docked near Oakland, that memorial was to be the centerpiece for an effort to redevelop Alameda Naval Base. But the plan is only getting started. And the *Hornet* sits in a hard-to-find industrial wasteland, more than $2 million in debt and barely able to keep the lights on. Given the

financial dilemma and the potential need to find a new home for this ship, few local ports can summon the enthusiasm to take on a second large-scale memorial at this time.(11)

Clearly the Bay Area is feeling the military absence. And, with the emerging challenges in the Pacific Ocean, San Francisco is far too strategically important for the Navy to write off. Both sides need to try harder to understand the other.

Coming Together

The Navy must find ways to engage highly educated communities.

Instead of the post–Cold War retreat from Boston, New York, and other progressive, San Franciscolike communities, close links to these vibrant maritime centers should have been cultivated and maintained.

Creative community engagement saved the Navy in the early 1920s, when the service was desperate to justify itself, and won the Navy long-term, high-value allies.(12)

Engagement works. In 1926, then-Commander Chester Nimitz was sent to University of California, Berkeley, to establish one of the first Naval ROTC units in the country. At the time, Nimitz was unsure the Navy could compete with college-life distractions. But after he finished an initial recruitment push, the campus was so supportive that the NROTC battalion was oversubscribed. A quarter of hopeful applicants had to be turned away.(13)

Nimitz accomplished this by immersing himself in university life. Rather than fight the "faintly hostile environment," he considered himself a "member of the University of California faculty, and the faculty, attracted by his unfailing good humor and recognizing his wide-ranging knowledge," accepted the officer as a colleague. They in-vited him to join faculty promotion boards and new faculty search committees.(14) Today, a robust NROTC program still flourishes.

More officers must follow Nimitz's example.

The Navy must do a better job of sustaining the local naval legacy. How many Bay Area residents realize the service is the oldest civic institution on the West Coast, or that Navy Commander John Montgomery captured the Spanish garrison and then established San Francisco?

Among military personnel also, too few know the local naval lore. For example, how many aviators know why the first deck landing took place on the Bay? Why do so few recall that the Navy first acted in a civil-support role after the devastating 1906 San Francisco earthquake?

Perhaps naval history segments could be added to curricula, from grade-school civics classes to college classrooms. Following Nimitz's example, a focus on educational efforts might help to repair the current lack of interest in war studies and military history. The Navy has a clear interest in helping to develop a more informed populace.

Both the Navy and civilians need to find a way to engage. The challenge is great, but the opportunity exists. And let's face it: The Navy that recovered from the catastrophic attack on Pearl Harbor can find a way to reconcile with a storied American city. National security leaders are overdue in taking a leading role. They can do a lot to mediate corrosive disputes between the military and certain communities.

Like it or not, our national security benefits from creatively engaging "anti-war" communities. San Francisco, however bumptious and protest-ridden it may be, remains a good Navy town -- perched on the edge of a critically important ocean. Let's keep it that way.

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